

Annual Report 2016



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Tejiendo Lazos Entre Fronteras
Weaving Bonds Across Borders

Our Mission

Weaving Bonds Across Borders is a women-led network that is building the power and leadership of youth from grassroots communities to work together for peace, women's rights and environmental justice.

We promote leadership from and exchange between the grassroots and global South through training, peacebuilding, and support for youth and community led actions.

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Myanmar/Burma

Training and Leadership Development

Weaving Bonds supported our youth group in Shan State, Burma to learn about gender rights, peacebuilding and inner peace. As the youth in our Shan State program were experiencing issues related to gender, peacebuilding, historical trauma and lack of trust between different ethnic groups, a workshop was organized to build youth knowledge and understanding of peace and gender issues.

"I realized that I could feel that what is wrong or right about what is happening in my surroundings today"

-Participant from Burma Workshop

"Before I came to this workshop, I had never thought about gender or peace, and now I feel these topics are very important." - Participant from Burma Workshop

Peacebuilding and Alliance Building

Weaving Bonds worked to address issues of trauma, self-confidence and stress for activists in Burma. Being young activists facing inequality, war, and violence, it is critical to support youth in managing their stress and mental health.

These workshops helped participants to build better understanding between each other, build inner peace among themselves and in their communities, and build up their individual confidence and belief in themselves.

"Inner peace is mostly what I was interested in and also gender too....I think if we are planning to do something we need to build peace of our mind first and then we can get anything we want and be succesful" - Participant from Burma Workshop.

Youth – Led Action and Activism Support

Weaving Bonds supported a youth-led initiative on land rights and land grabbing in Mong Pan, Shan State.

Under the military regime in Myanmar, widespread land grabbing by the government and military occurred. The Weaving Bonds youth group in Burma found that many local farmers were lacking in information and legal trainings on human rights and land rights, which meant that many farmers could not claim their land back.

Weaving Bonds youth raised awareness about land rights to the communities who have been victims of land grabbing in Mong Pan Township.

Our youth interns conducted workshops in Mong Pan, Southern Shan State where they trained 122 local farmers on land rights, land use policy and the legal procedure to request land titles.

Weaving Bonds collected data about land grabbing in Mong Pan and shared the concerns of affected communities to a wider audience through social media.

Youth built relationships and trust with local farmer participants, many of whom used to fear social activities as they had been living under military rule for many decades. Youth produced a short film about land rights where they analyzed the situation of land grabbing in Mong Pan.

Weaving Bonds guided the affected communities to claim back their land by going through the land rights procedures and advocated to the Shan State Government on land rights.

We supported 7 local farmers to submit letters to the local authorities asking for the return of their land. By the end of the year, the local farmer participants knew their fundamental rights, how to submit

letters to the government, and the procedure how to request their official land title from the government. (photo)

China

Training and Leadership Development

Weaving Bonds promoted leadership and capacity building for youth and grassroots organizations in Qinghai, China working on peacebuilding, gender and environment issues.

In 2016, Weaving Bonds and its partners held local workshops in Qinghai Province, China. The aim of the local workshops was to give opportunities to youth to learn critical knowledge on environmental, gender and peace building issues in their own context and to prepare them to join activities at the regional level. In these capacity building workshops, participants learned how to write narrative stories, public speaking skills and interview skills as well as knowledge about environmental and gender issues in their region. This knowledge helped them learn how to document changes, express their concerns, raise their voices and reach out to larger audiences outside their communities.

Peacebuilding and Alliance Building

Weaving Bonds promoted peace, harmony and environmental protection by bringing diverse ethnic youth to local workshops in China. Having diverse grassroots organizations representing multiple ethnic groups as well as university students be involved in our workshops brought hope for solidarity and alliance building across China and the Mekong Region. The localized workshops were a precious opportunity for participants to share their experiences with each other, transform conflicts, build trust for mutual development, and establish collaborations for environmental and gender equality activities.

Youth – Led Action and Activism Support

Weaving Bonds supported youth-led actions for environmental awareness including sharing stories of youth leadership on the environment in China. As it is difficult for youth in China to access critical knowledge on environment and gender issues, the Weaving Bonds youth group initiated their own projects to organize trainings and knowledge exchanges in local schools as well as garbage management activities in their communities. Youth participants were also encouraged to produce their own stories about their lives related to gender and the environment, and Weaving Bonds shared their stories on Facebook and other social media sites to increase the audience for their stories. The stories were also translated into English, Chinese, and other Mekong languages so that they could reach as many people as possible.

(photo) “This workshop is very good and I already attended Weaving Bonds workshops several times. I learned a lot of new knowledge from the teachers and I will continually be working on environmental issues in my region. I hope I could attend more workshops in the future.” -- Participant from China Workshop

“This workshop is very interesting and the teachers were working hard during the workshop to help each student. I wish we will have a longer time for next workshop and learn more gender issues.”- Participant from China Workshop

Mekong Region

Training and Leadership Development

Weaving Bonds brought young leaders from the Mekong Region to exchange knowledge and experiences in advocacy and campaigning, environmental protection, water governance, gender and women's leadership.

For our regional workshop in Thailand, we brought together 13 participants from China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, Laos, and Thailand. The majority of the youth (8 youth) worked for civil society groups and the other 5 youth were university students with a background and interest in gender, women's leadership, law and the environment.

Overall, this workshop improved their knowledge on water governance, environmental protection and peacebuilding, and helped them come up with alternative solutions for sustainable community development.

Weaving Bonds provided English training to support youth from marginalized communities to join our regional platform.

We selected 5 youth from China, Vietnam, Laos and one Weaving Bonds intern from Burma to attend an English training for 10 days before joining the regional workshop. From this English training, our youth built their own confidence and learnt presentation skills. Through our English language training, we were able to include youth from grassroots backgrounds who would traditionally have more difficulty accessing regional and international trainings due to the language barrier.

Weaving Bonds used a student-centered teaching methodology and young women were encouraged to teach and learn together during our workshop.

In contrast to the traditional classroom with its teacher-centered style, the Weaving Bonds workshops are a friendly environment to students, where they are comfortable to express themselves and share their problems and ideas freely. Additionally, in this workshop, Weaving Bonds invited other young women leaders and grassroots activists to give trainings on gender, women's leadership, advocacy and campaigning skills. Furthermore, the students also learned facilitation skills so that they can be trainers for other workshops held by Weaving Bonds and build up their training and leadership skills.

Peacebuilding and Alliance Building

Weaving Bonds built a foundation for peacebuilding and conflict transformation process among different groups and communities in the Mekong region. Youth from diverse backgrounds including indigenous groups, minorities, and grassroots communities who had conflicts with each other in the past built trust and exchanged their points of view. They also learned the basics of conflict transformation including how to analyze the cause and solution for conflicts.

We built network our among youth activists for sustainable development in order to collaborate in the future for advocacy and campaigns, especially on the trans-boundary projects. Our youth also met with a diverse range of environmentalists, indigenous rights groups, lawyers and other youth groups in order to build their relationships and alliances across borders.

Women's Leadership and Gender Rights

Weaving Bonds promoted women's rights and women's leadership by encouraging woman to take the lead in our work and also training male participants about gender equality. In all our workshops, we gave our first consideration to young women who have less opportunities in their communities/societies. Women's rights and women leadership are the main curriculum in all of our workshops, in particular building trust and self-confidence among women, as well as training young men to understand about women's rights.

Youth-Led Action and Activism Support

Weaving Bonds continued to support youth participants after the regional workshop through our internship and small grant programs. Through our alumni program, we continued to motivate and support young people to keep doing work in their communities when they return home. Some of youth have continued to work on their narrative stories and have also been engaged in advocacy works in their countries. Weaving Bonds staff also helped our alumni to improve their stories and writing skills, and gradually published their stories online so that more readers would understand the situation of youth, gender and the environment in the Mekong region. Moreover, our alumni program kept our network updated, shared inspiring stories, news and scholarship information among our alumni.

Small Grants Program

We supported the Weaving Bonds alumni to lead initiatives in their communities with our small grants program. Through this program, youth can apply for grants from Weaving Bonds to conduct their own activities in their home towns. They can also apply to be interns at our program to learn further about peacebuilding, leadership skills, and gender.

Internship Program

We had 5 interns for our program in 2016. Two interns were from Burma (2 female), 2 interns were from China (1 male and 1 female) and another intern was from Japan (1 female). Each of them worked with Weaving Bonds for 3 months. The previous interns helped the Weaving Bonds team on project implementation, financial reporting, story collection, producing narrative stories and reviewing project proposals and reports from alumni. Our interns also conducted a field study to support alumni in Cambodia. Through their work, our interns improved their facilitation skills, writing skills, interview skills, communication skills and ability to be young leaders.

(photo)

Youth Stories

A Story from Ann: A Young Woman in Burma's Struggle for Gender Equality *Interviewed and written by Weaving Bonds staff Kathy*

Ann is 24 years old this year. She was born in the rural Kachin State of Myanmar. Unfortunately, when she was 3 months old, Ann lost her father, which greatly impacted her family. Without any other choice, Ann's mother decided to bring her two daughters to the local orphanage center, where Ann and her sister have been living until now. Ann and I met each other in Shan State, Myanmar in August 2016 when she joined one of Weaving Bonds' local workshops on gender and environmental issues. Afterwards, she became our intern for three months in Chiang Mai, Thailand. We stayed together and shared cooking responsibilities in our office for most of the time. Gradually, we started to open up and share our personal stories. As we became closer and closer, I learned of many different experiences that she had lived through. Some of these stories made me feel very sad since they were all traumatic experiences.

One day she told me: "My mother is a widow. She lost her husband at a young age. My late father was a Kachin soldier who died in the war. My parents were only together for seven years after their marriage. My

mother had three children, but unfortunately, my brother died before he grew up. My elder sister and I survived only because of my mother. It wasn't easy for my mother to raise two children without any husband. My mother didn't inherit any property from her parents either. In our society, widows are not allowed to participate in discussing community issues and the villagers never pay respect to the widows in my village. I still remember some of the men who would come to my house in the middle of the night and harass my mom. Sometimes, these men would come to our house to drink alcohol and my mom, sister, and I would all have to serve them. We couldn't go to bed for the whole night. At the same time, my sister and I would have to protect my mom from these men and the threat of sexual harassment. Those men felt that they could do anything to us since we were women without any men in our family to protect us".

In this conversation, it became clear to me how Ann's mother, her elder sister, as well as Ann herself often faced sexual violence and discrimination in her community. We can see clearly how her mother had an extremely low social status as a "widow", was disrespected, and thoroughly marginalized by her community members. Then Ann continued her story:

"After my mom left her community and brought us to the orphanage center, we started our new life there. I was only nine years old when I first came to the orphanage center. We still didn't have enough food to eat, so I had to collect food from the village garbage cans along with the other kids at the orphanage center. At that time, my sister was staying at the pastor's house where she had to cook for them while attending school at the same time."

She shared about her life in the orphanage: "My sisters and I grew up in the orphanage center so we could not talk to each other often. My sister had to work at the pastor's family. I can say that our orphanage center is like a jail and we are like prisoners. Even though my mom worked at the orphanage center, she could not talk to me often. I spent 10 years in the orphanage center, but I only knew my school and the orphanage center. I didn't know other places outside of school and the center. The orphanage center never allowed us to go outside. We could only go outside on some special occasions, like festivals and holidays. Yes, it truly is the "jail life." The children in the orphanage center have no dreams for the future and they often turn into 'bad people' after coming out from the orphanage center. Some die in early age. Others become thieves or get married at a young age, like my sister for example".

Ann identified that she was able to change her life through accessing education: "I stayed at the orphanage center for 12 years until I went to college. I finished my college education with a major in Social Sciences in 2015. Afterwards, I came back to the orphanage center to help take care of the children and provide education to homeless kids."

She was quiet, into her thoughts for a while before she continued after a deep breath. "Without education, one ends up like my elder sister. She doesn't have any voice in her husband's family. She got married to

a rich man in another village, but they fight all the time. Her life doesn't look so happy or in harmony". She continued to tell me that that her elder sister only graduated from high school before she got married without letting her mother know. Her husband's family never asked her mother's opinion on the marriage either. The bridegroom – now her sister's husband, never came to ask her mother's permission on this marriage simply because her mother is a widow and there is no need to get permission from a widow.

Ann thinks that if her sister had a higher education then at least she would gain her husband's family's respect on the topic of marriage. She would understand she has the right to let her husband's family know how important her mother is in her life. Instead, she feels she cannot because they will not respect a "widow's daughter."

In conclusion, Ann felt that education was the main way for her and other women to change their lives and achieve equality, sharing her strong belief that "I always feel that education could change our lives. ***I really believe that education is the main factor that can change a bad situation***".

From this story, we can see why Ann always mentioned that education is the most important factor for her. She wants to enhance her knowledge and help the women and girls in her community to be safe from sexual violence, gender discrimination, and child abuse. She described the orphanage center as being like a jail and children like prisoners on account of lacking basic freedoms and rights to pursue their own dreams. As a young Kachin woman and an educated woman from a minority background, she has faced many obstacles in her life. All of these obstacles have shaped who she is and where her life will take her in the future.

During the time of this open-ended interview, Ann's role in our team was that of a research assistant. Her story was edited together with her help.

Our organization's work is dedicated to promoting young women's leadership skills through organizing short-term trainings and workshops. We all hope that voices like Ann's will be heard by other young women who face similar gender issues in their life and we wish Ann will be successful on her path and take a leadership role in her community to help more women in future. We sincerely hope that her story will speak to others about the gender discrimination that is faced by countless women day to day.

A Story from Somnang: A Cambodian Young Environmentalist ***Interviewed and written by Weaving Bonds intern Sissy***

Somnang was born in a village in the Areng Valley, Cambodia. Born in the rainforest, he learned to find food and useful resources from the forest. As he loved to travel around, he found that being a tourism guide was a job that suited him and then he learned that tourism was a more sustainable way to gain money from the rainforest compared with cutting wood. He realized if there was no forest left, the village would have nothing.

Somnang's life changed when he met Alex in the Areng Valley in 2012. Alex was from Spain but could speak Cambodian and had stayed in many Cambodia for years. Somnang learned from Alex that a dam called the Cheay Areng dam was being planned in the region and that the Areng Valley would be totally submerged.

As a guide, Somnang knew clearly about the value of the Areng Valley, which was precious not only because it was almost the last habitat of some rare wildlife species but also as because it was the home of as many as 1,500 villagers, most of whom were indigenous families whose ancestors had lived in this region for centuries. Since then, Somnang joined the fight to protect the Areng Valley. Together, he and Alex founded an NGO called Mother Nature to protect the area.

Together with local villagers, they asked help from monks and organized several tree-ordaining ceremonies in the Areng Valley. They also did other protest activities such as road-blocks and made YouTube videos to share the plight of the valley. Mother Nature's activism was so effective, and the YouTube videos were so popular, attracting hundreds of thousands of followers across the country, that in early 2015 Alex was eventually arrested and forcibly deported from Cambodia. But Somnang and more and more people continued fighting for the Areng Valley.

In a bid to curtail this massive outpouring of criticism against his government's tactics, the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen announced in February 2015 that the construction of the Cheay Areng Dam would not go ahead on his mandate, which will last until 2018. Somnang and the villagers in the Areng Valley successfully protected their home, at least temporarily. Meanwhile, Mother Nature keeps on fighting against other threats to nature in Cambodia. He and two other leaders of Mother Nature were arrested on August 2015 during a protest activity to protect the mangrove forests of Cambodia from dredging. They were put in jail for ten months and fifteen days.

According to Somnang, advocacy can't solve all the problems related to the dam. The villagers in the Areng Valley also need to show the government that they can have sustainable development in the valley and ensure that the compensation that the dam companies would have to give would be so prohibitively high that they can keep the valley forever. Somnang found eco-tourism to be an alternative solution. He joined our regional workshop in Chiang Mai arranged by Weaving Bonds Across Borders to learn more about development and environmental conservation. He then got support from Weaving Bonds Across Borders to implement his pilot eco-tourism project in the Areng Valley, thus hopefully ensuring this special area will continue to be safe from development and protected for ever.

A Story from Gigi: Empowering the Women of Cambodia
Interviewed and written by Weaving Bonds staff Thoe Thoe



Gigi is from Cambodia. She is the Women's Coordinator for Mother Nature in Koh Kong Province, Cambodia. She works with women to promote empowerment, education and understanding between communities around Cambodia. She does this through providing trainings to promote awareness among women in Cambodia on issues such as women's rights, women's leadership and environmental protection. She also leads her women's group to engage in campaigns and non-violent protests related to environmental protection.

Gigi's commitment to environmental protection came out of her own personal experiences. In 2009, just before she was going to take her high school exams, Gigi's family and many people in

her community suffered from the effects of a sand dredging project. They had to move houses and she had to drop out from high school. The government and the company took away their land to do sand mining projects and then gave them very little compensation. Her family faced a difficult time, and because of this, she has decided to work to protect the land, environment and women's lives in the future. After she decided, her family didn't allow her to participate in social work and banned her decision. Finally, she tried to go against her family to start doing her work for society and the environment because of her passion and her personal experiences as the victim of sand mining.

In November 2016, Gigi joined a 10 day workshop organized by Weaving Bonds across Borders. In this workshop, she was a very active student and shared a lot of her work and life experiences. After the workshop, she received a small grant from Weaving Bonds to organize a project in Koh Sro Lao Island, Koh Kong Province, Cambodia. There are 3 villages and 700 people in Koh SroLao Island. They are facing the problem of dredging and have suffered from the impacts of dredging such as damaged mangrove forests, impacts to fishing and water pollution. The villagers were not aware of how to protect their environment from dredging and what their rights were. Therefore, Gigi decided to provide trainings to give awareness to the community about the impacts of dredging, how to protect the environment, women's rights and non-violent campaign strategies to the villagers, especially women.

Before joining the Weaving Bonds workshop, Gigi faced a difficult time working as a freelancer. After she joined the workshop, she decided to become a staff member of Mother Nature. She got new ideas and strategies for her life from this workshop.

In my point of view, Gigi is a valuable leader for women in her community. She is very good at organizing women in the community to cooperate in social activities. In communities, organizing other women can be very difficult for us, but she can handle her challenges well and build trust with women in the communities

she works in. Every time before she starts her projects , she always tries to be familiar with the communities and try to understand their livelihood situation. Her aims are to build peaceful communities in Cambodia where women can lead each other and empower themselves, and to help achieve this by promoting awareness about women's rights and women's leadership so that women can organize by themselves to do campaigns, advocacy and non-violent protest related to environmental protection. To conclude, she is an empathetic person who has given a lot for her communities and the people of Cambodia.



Koh Sro Lao Village, Koh Kong Province, Cambodia



Taking a video to post on Facebook about protecting mangrove forests against dredging



Non-violent campaign to protect mangrove forests against dredging

Financial Report

2016 Financial Report

2016 Revenue	Amount in USD
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Individual and Community Donations	1,696
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Foundation Grants	40,018
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<u>Total Revenue</u>	<u>41,714</u>
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2016 Expenditure	Amount in USD
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Program Expenses	15,865
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Staffing cost	16,461
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Overhead and Emergency Fund	2,150
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Total Program Expenses	40,367
Balance on Hand (11 Dec 2016)	1,338

Appreciations

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Organizations and Foundations

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 IMekong
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 International Rivers
 Karen Environmental and Social Action Network
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 Magical Light Foundation
 Mekong Energy and Ecology Network
 Mekong School and Alumni Network
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Friends and Network

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We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your support and commitment to work together for a better world.

To support our work or become a monthly donor, please contact us or visit www.weavingbonds.org